

Books of the future

Currently, I notice that the people around me have bookshelves in their homes, but the next generation down, I already see has smaller bookshelves. The public now searches for data, information and news online, rarely perusing physical bookshelves for an answer to a particular question. It is so much simpler to use a phone or laptop than to walk along the shelves in search of opinions. Printed books still have value for historical research and academic publishing, or as fictional or factual narratives that we want to carry as paperbacks on the bus or train, and for young readers (most parents I know still read illustrated books to their small children).

If printed books are to retain their value as a cultural artefact, then they need - as the artist Otto put it in his *Book Jacket* (2014) - to have an impact on their audience. To influence us to touch them, pick them up, read them, buy them, they will need to 'look right'. Artists' books have built and aligned their status according to the value of the printed book, so will arrive at their fate in parallel. If digital reading is going to be the majority method of the future, then how will physical books survive? And what will artists' books offer that digital books cannot? Could artists' books help to save the printed book?

So we need to be able to touch them. The Australian artist and academic Tim Mosely reflects upon how, in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) Deleuze and Guattari describe a book as a series of surfaces that the reader must move over, across and around to develop tangible conceptions of it. Mosely's artists' books such as the *Confluentés* Sea series (2014) investigate notions of haptic smooth space and the Western privileging of the eye over the hand. His research investigates ideas of materiality, the autographic print and haptic reception of books. His artists' books are hand printed, folded, torn and engineered in order to demand that they be handled, touched and navigated through by others' hands.

Books might be dramatic and grab our attention through seemingly magical tricks, such as Super Terrain's *Fahrenheit 451*, printed with black, heat sensitive ink that only reveals the text when a match is held to it. Alluding to the tyranny of the physical destruction of books but using fire to be able to read a book rather than burn it. Digitisation of books was meant to be the future of democracy; the Gutenberg project for example offers global access to texts and the ideas contained within them to anyone with access to the internet. But firewalls in many countries preclude their citizens' abilities to view online publications. *Just one thing after another* (2016) by Ian Andrews is a large-scale, loose-leaf artist's book from his series *The Shuffle of things*. Its dense imagery is reminiscent of a richly woven tapestry, but the patterns are drawn from live disasters such as riots or rocket launch explosions. He is conveying how we often experience things second-hand via digital devices even when we are physically present. If you are immersed in a physical book it is just you and it there in that moment.

Will physical artists' books soon be used to communicate thoughts, ideas and messages of protest in our current times of digital monitoring of society? Will letterpress printed books such as Semple Press's *MAI 1968 NOW* (2016) or Sarah Nicholls's *Wipe the Slate* or *Milky Seas* (Brain Washing from Phone Towers series, 2015) - be our calls to actions or our warning communication systems? Might we all be distributing copies of Theresa Easton's emergency *Anti-Trump Poster Zine* (2017)? Will we find, as in 17th Century Brazil, where poets' works were handwritten on paper and smuggled into others' hands, or in Samizdat publications of the pre-Glasnost Eastern Bloc, that artists' books might provide a future means of

alternative, underground communication? Just as Sara Ranchouse's pulp-size publications *Misdirection* (1994) or Angie Waller's *Data Mining the Amazon* (2003) resemble 'ordinary' books, what guises might artists' books assume in the future? And where will they sit so innocently that they seem unimpeachable?

Through their beauty or stature will they engage our hands and open our minds? Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky* (1988-) purposely contains nothing legible to consider how we communicate and understand meaning, and how we are communicated to. In light of how the Chinese government has officially erased the history of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests and their consequences, this huge artwork implies gravitas through its size but can also remind us that 'official' does not necessarily mean 'true'. In Australia, Sue Anderson and Gwen Harrison's *Cockatoo* series (2014 onwards) and Clyde McGill's *Witness* (2016) for example, tell us terrible stories of cruelty and human injustice by historical colonisers and present-day government policies through the most visceral, beautifully hand printed artefacts.

And will there be future books that cannot work, or just couldn't exist digitally? I'm thinking of *The Book of Disquiet* by Tim Hopkins (2017), which took two years to print on hundreds of ephemeral fragments such as cards, envelopes, stamps and luggage tags, using an Adana press, or Leonard McDermid's handprinted poetry pamphlet *Landway* (2017). Les Bicknell's *using a known to make an unknown* (2017) explores connections between the thinking processes involved in nanotechnology and the creation of artists' books, using the idea of 'bookness' to present sequence, time and order, to make the 'invisible visible'. Or what about Aaron Cohick's *Alphabet One: A Submanifesto of the NewLights Press* (2017), a 'noise' alphabet printed from woven collagraph blocks on newsprint, or Egidija Čiricaitė's *Soft Snow* (2018) exploring the interplay of language, image and text through translucent overlays of word tracks falling like footprints onto a sundown-lit snowscape. These need to exist as physical artefacts.

Perhaps whilst paper is still in vogue, still important, everyone should read Gloria Glitzer's manifesto on self-publishing and homage to future zinesters - *The book as the future of the past* (Franziska Brandt & Moritz Grünke, 2015). But if paper fails, and printed books, then artists' books disappear, we should pack our bags in protest and escape to Radosław Nowakowski's book state of *Liberland* (2012, <http://www.liberatorium.com>) where we can live virtually and forever within the pages of a book.